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**OBEY CALLS FOR ‘NEW THINKING’  
ABOUT DISASTER PLANNING**

House Approves \$10.5 Billion  
Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Bill To Fund Disaster Relief

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** “Seventh District Congressman Dave Obey, the senior Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, made the following statement today during floor consideration of the \$10.5 billion emergency supplemental appropriations bill that was necessary to fund disaster relief efforts in response to the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina.

“Mr. Speaker, I think that the situation in the gulf coast is serious enough that it warrants more than a dog and pony show and that it warrants some thoughtful discussion of how problems like this might be avoided in the future.

“I would simply say that I have been horrified watching my television set over the past few days, as I moved around my district in Wisconsin, to see the absolute inadequacy of the Federal response to what has occurred. I would hope that the magnitude of the disaster which we have seen would make us all think through the degree of lack of discipline and denial that has marked this country's preparation for not just natural disasters but disasters of other origins as well.

“Point One: I was personally appalled to see an interview with a representative of the Army Corps of Engineers in which he explained away our failure to prepare for anything worse than a level three hurricane for the New Orleans area by saying in

essence that a cost-benefit analysis had been done, and it was concluded that it was not cost beneficial for us to prepare for anything above a level three hurricane. What that in essence says is that you are not going to worry about the biggest disasters that can occur; you are only going to worry about the smaller ones.

“Whether it is with a hurricane, or whether the action of the Mississippi River a number of years ago, how many times do we have to see disasters overwhelm our preparedness before we recognize that we are playing Russian Roulette with people’s lives, with their livelihood and with the life of whole communities if we do not prepare for the worst?

“Point two: I think it is fair to say that the administration and the Congress itself has not covered itself with glory in terms of anticipating problems like this. We have seen the Congress, in fiscal year 2004, cut the budget request by \$170 million for FEMA. We have seen an amendment by the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. Moran) to try to supplement FEMA

funding several years ago turned down by the House. We have seen flood control projects in the gulf short-sheeted in Federal budget request from the executive, and we have seen now stories, one by Sidney Blumenthal, which makes the point that, in early 2001, FEMA management issued a report saying that a hurricane striking New Orleans was one of the three most likely disasters in the U.S., including a terrorist attack on New York City.

“Yet the Federal budget has not demonstrated any serious response to that warning. And we have seen other comments as well in the paper, including a number by Louisiana papers, documenting the lack of effective Federal response. Another statement in the New York Times indicated that 5 days after Katrina hit, the response from our government was still spectacularly inadequate and in the words of the editorial amounts to a stunning lack of both preparation and urgency in the Federal Government response. I would hope that the pictures that we have seen on our television sets would change that.

“The third point I would simply make is that I think the devastation and utter destruction that we have seen indicates that we have a serious problem not just with respect to our response to natural disasters but in response to other potential disasters.

“I would hope that we would take to heart the lessons that this disaster ought to teach us about the need for more adequate preparation across the board, including potential terrorist attacks. There are those of us in the Congress who still believe that we are not doing enough to secure our borders.

“There are those of us who still believe that we are not doing enough to protect this country against terrorist attacks from air cargo.

“There are those of us who believe that we are not doing nearly enough to protect this county against terrorist attacks by the use of containers in our ports; and in my view, the response of the administration and the Congress since 9/11 on that score has been totally

inadequate.

“I think that this disaster in the gulf demonstrates the importance of ending the practice of casual thinking on these potential problems.

“Point four: and I do not know the answer to this, but I know questions have been raised about whether or not the heavy involvement of our Guard and Reserve forces in Iraq is in any way linked to the fact that we have had so few Guard and Reserve personnel being used in response to this disaster. I do not know whether there is a direct causation or not, but I do know that there are some 11,000 Guard and Reserve forces from the affected States now in Iraq and those are obviously troops that cannot be used on their home ground.

“I think we need to examine very carefully whether or not this demonstrates that we need to do more to build up the size of our regular Army forces so that we do have a greater capacity to use the Guard and

Reserve forces at home when they are needed.

“I would also say that every time that we have a disaster, Congress responds by tossing together an appropriations bill for an emergency appropriation. It would seem to me after all of the disasters that we have had that we should have a more regularized approach to the problem. I have introduced in the past, and I will introduce again, legislation asking that we establish an experience-rated insurance fund from which all States can purchase insurance coverage against future disasters so that you have a ready-made source of funding the moment these disasters hit.

“There are five or six States in the Union that experience disasters on a fairly regular basis, and it seems to me that we need to have an experience-rated insurance system so that we take into full account the cost of hurricanes and the cost of other disasters that might occur. If we did that, we might see a greater level of preparation with respect to, for instance, long-term planning by the Corps of

Engineers to deal with the most severe hurricanes.

“Mr. Speaker, this legislation obviously has to pass, but I hope this represents just the beginning of some new thinking so that we do not wind up 3 or 4 years from now facing yet another problem as unprepared as we apparently were for this unfortunate and heart-rending incident.”